



SCHOOLS, TEACHERS & STUDENTS

Working with parents with personality disorder

Parents with personality disorder have the same needs, fears and hopes as others; just as their children need love, protection and nurturance. Personality disorder is not only challenging for the parent, but also for the child and education staff trying to work with the family unit. Effective communication is the key to avoiding misunderstandings, misinterpretations and conflict.



When parenting becomes a challenge: what are the signs?

For parents with personality disorder the everyday challenges of parenting are intensified. This can make it difficult to respond to their child's needs effectively, and in turn, lead to the young person feeling misunderstood, unsupported, or taking on carer responsibilities for their parent or siblings. Some difficulties include:

- Stress in the parent-child relationship: Both parents and young people may find it difficult to communicate and understand each other which may lead to arguments. When unwell the parent might also find it challenging to have quality time with their child
- Difficulty helping children that are struggling: Particularly when the parent is unwell and if the young person needs extra support because of their own stressors at school or with friends
- Difficulty in keeping things consistent: Household structure, routine and discipline can be hard to maintain when life becomes stressful for parents with personality disorder. Sometimes it might even feel like the young person has to take charge instead of the parent

Communicating effectively with parents with personality disorder

People with a personality disorder can be particularly sensitive to verbal and non-verbal (e.g. body language) communication.

- Be clear in communication: Try to be unambiguous, neutral and clear in your communication. If your communication is misread, the person may respond with anger, humiliation or insecurity. Reflect after what you said (or did not say) and how you said it – it may help you communicate more effectively in the future
- Allow the other person room to speak: If the person feels interrupted they may perceive this as rejection or aggression and may respond negatively in return. Providing the person with opportunities to talk will help the person express themselves verbally
- Be aware of your own non-verbal communication: This will ensure that you are giving a clear overall picture of your intended message. For example: tone of voice, pace, and facial expression. It is helpful to keep your tone of voice and facial expression neutral

- “Good enough” communication: Remember that you are not always going to get it right. The conversation will not run perfectly every time
- Display compassion, respect, a non-judgemental attitude, and validation of feelings at all times
- Aim to provide what is reasonable even though you may feel pulled into providing more help and assistance than what is usual. It is important to keep in mind your role and its limits and boundaries. Reinforce how others such as family therapists or welfare workers can more appropriately assist in helping the person to have their needs responded

Supporting parents with personality disorder: what can help?

Talking honestly to parents and students can provide families with the support they need. Strategies to assist include:

- Engaging appropriate mental health supports for students
- Ensure plans are in place for the student in times of stress when a parent is getting unwell
- Building on students’ strengths and keeping the good things that are helping the student
- Ensure school supports the student’s basic needs – uniforms, food, drink and resources to participate
- Reflecting on difficulties experienced in the home environment and adapt homework and assignment requirements appropriately



Help is available

Project Air Strategy has a parenting with personality disorder program that provides an integrated set of resources to assist people to parent when they have a personality disorder.

These resources include a Brief Parenting Intervention for mental health workers, fact sheets for people with personality disorder who are also parents and a film illustrating key points.

The three key principles of this program are (1) ensure everyone is safe and plans are in place when the parent becomes unwell, (2) shield children from personality disorder symptoms by separating parenting from the mental illness (3) ensure psychological treatment for the parent is maintained, particularly as this can also improve parent-child relationships